What Anna-Maria yearned for was a pair of Canadian-type jeans and a field trip with the rest of the class. Naturally, her father wouldn't hear of such wickedness

BY MARGARET DRURY GANE

the PURPOSE *of the* EXERCISE

The schoolroom rustled with quarter-to-four impatience to get away. Still Miss Lissette, never one to watch clocks, sang on past the bell, her voice steadily jammed now at a firm falsetto. In the morning, it was contralto. By closing, it had mounted nearly a full scale.

"Now, you've *got* the map, and all the information your parents will *need. You know* the purpose of the exercise, don't you? To take a *field* trip that will *enrich* our nature studies." She enthused on that for a time, until the stampede down the hall outside the closed door jolted her to the realization that she must stop. "*Oh*, it's time to *leave*, isn't it?" Like a metronome, she zipped up her tempo: "There are Italian translations for those of you who want them, remember to get yes or no ticked off and your parent's signature of course —" Above her slim fair head, drafted with chalk on the blackboard, was Harris Provincial Park and Bird Sanctuary, a rough oblong of green interrupted by two blue streaks, one a river and the other a small lake. Neat orange xs marked the route the bus would take. Anna-Maria Da Costa, born in Italy but a Canadian resident for three years, hastily interpreted her teacher's flying commentary for the class newcomers, Franco and Paula Guardino, who spoke little English. "*Two* nights out, remember," Miss Lissette was repeating — and she dismissed a class whose minds had already left the room.

Anna-Maria folded her paper with elaborate care and prodded it into her skirt pocket, where an ironed, unused lace handkerchief was hidden. Nobody used those here, except a few women who clung to the graces of another time. But then, thought the girl, not many of her friends wore skirts all the time either. *Continued on page 89*

ILLUSTRATION BY MURIEL WOOD

THE PURPOSE OF THE EXERCISE

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Denim jeans — her eyes hungered after them — cuffless and frayed with wear, patched with birth signs and embroidered with crazy sayings. Despite pleadings, her parents had ruled them out. She knew how Paula and Franco felt now because it had all happened to her. There had been the incomprehensible gabble of another language, full of elusive, jagged consonants rarely relieved by the by the flowing Italian vowels; the slang, the real key to belonging; the sticking out in the classroom, even if people were kind. Then, after a long time, the exuberance of *knowing*, of flinging out a *yeah*, a *so what*, of not being noticed, of belonging. Best of all was the buoyant thrill of being able to speak two languages, which one-upped the newcomer over many Anglo peers, who not only couldn't speak Italian but had trouble with English!

Still, she was not up to Gina Cordova yet. Her parents were citizens now, thoroughly bilingual, the first in their district to hoist a Canadian flag above their flourishing market. Anna-Maria turned down Starling Street in time to see Gina getting a one-armed bear hug from her father, who'd paused in his polishing of eggplants for the moment of greeting. Then, like an artist, he carefully arranged Savoy cabbages swirl-side up, and framed them with the glowing eggplants.

"Hi, Mr. Cordova," Anna-Maria called, "that looks really nice."

"By the time your Mom gets here, I'll have the new limes in. Tell her there's fresh eggs, too —" But the girl simply nodded, watching the jeaned backside of his lucky daughter disappearing through the back entrance. At once, she hated her skirt again, flip-flapping navy pleats opening and closing, as she swung along past the old row housing of rust brick, with baroque woodwork dripping like icing above the eaves. Some had been entirely painted white, in the Italian tradition. All had railed front verandas; most had the little front lawns converted to vegetable gardens, now freshly planted — the long habit of using precious inches of space for survival and economy.

But Aunt Maria doesn't do that, the girl thought, musing on her mother's elder sister. Of course she'd come out much earlier, sometime in the fifties, and lived now with her hustling, wealthy husband in the city's hushed and treed west end. There, people hung lush baskets of begonias, not tomatoes — and the lawns were edged with sweet cedar hedges or architectural rockeries. Nobody ate *anything* from the front lawn, that was for sure. Anna-Maria saw her through 12-year-old eyes — faultless, blessed, a goal. Aunt Maria had no accent now; she ran a real-estate office; had once met the Italian ambassador at a reception. Like Sophia Loren, she'd lightened the once-dark hair to cinnamon but retained a sort of earthy patrician warmth that drew the reticent to her while keeping her irrevocably European. "You're never *not* Italian," she'd once told her niece quietly. "That's why I love to come to your house, to get in touch with the roots again, you see?" The family, however much they loved her, viewed her with a curious blend of envy and suspicion. Anna-Maria had noted, for instance, how differently her father treated Maria — asking how was business, lighting cigarettes for her when he wouldn't hear of his own wife smoking. If he admired her, it seemed to be because he did not have to live with her independence, which he found unsettling, if prosperous. "They're ahead of us now," he would allow privately, "but just give me time! We'll be so rich!"

Anna-Maria went up the veranda stairs into her own house — quietly, because her father's early shift meant he would be home and napping now. His lopsided, clay-clotted work boots were by the door. She paused in the hall to glance at herself in the mirror. Humidity had waved her hair again, and she tugged at it uselessly, like some wayward pet misbehaving at the end of a leash. *I would love it short*, she yearned, *and thin and blond like Cindy Baker's. When I'm grown, I'll tint it and iron it down*. From the kitchen, she heard her grandmother and her mother interchange in swift Italian as they prepared dinner. "Anna?" her mother called softly.

"Hi."

"Anna-Maria," her grandmother echoed, drawing the name into a song, Awwnna-Mareea. The old woman spoke no English, and had never bothered to drop the proud widow's black clothing, though there was no rule for it

here. Anna-Maria saw her straddled on the low stool, peeling potatoes over a newspaper spread below, her laced black shoes poking out like pipes below an ancient furnace. The face that turned to the granddaughter was mapped with wrinkles, sunburned, full of love. In comparison, the mother was round, ripe, and bustling, merry eyes dripping from an onion just sliced. She waved a washed hand in her daughter's direction. "Sid-down, okay? I wanna hear all about the school. You have a good day? Homework?"

"A geography project —and a paper to look at. For *you* to look at, I mean."

Her mother poured milk for the girl and coffee for herself and sank with relief at the kitchen table. "Aunt Maria is coming for dinner tonight. George is away for the week. She want to know what you want for your birthday, too."

"There's still a week," Anna said. "I can't think of anything. Maybe she can surprise me."

Her mother opened wide mischievous eyes: "Might as well make it something big with Maria, eh? She likes to spend."

"I guess."

"What does that mean, *I guess*?" Emma Da Costa was taking English for Newcomers at night school once a week. "I guess" had not yet been covered.

"It's like saying, 'I suppose so,' or 'perhaps,' " the girl explained. "You can guess *about* something, too — trying to decide what might happen."

"So, your Poppa will wake up soon, *I guess*?"

"Right!"

"Okay." The girl's mother planted her two hands flatly on the table. "Now you show me the paper."

"There's one in Italian, too —"

"Give me the English," her mother demanded, "and don't tell me nothing."

" — *anything* —"

"Anything, unless I ask you."

Concentration plowed a little vertical rut between her heavy brows, and one blunt forefinger followed the words along the page.

"What's this word? The one with the C?"

"Coniferous — like pine trees, the kind we have at Christmas. They have cones. We'll be studying them on the field trip." The girl slipped that in gently, hardly daring to say more. Past experience had taught her not to interfere, not to push. Anna-Maria walked casually from the table. Lightly, lightly she called from the door: "*One* parent can sign, you know. Miss Lissette said —" But her mother was too engrossed in translation to do more than nod.

Cesare Da Costa seemed built-in to the chair at the head of the table. He had bathed off the pale dust that lay over him like industrial dandruff after a day's work and was refreshed from his short, deep sleep. Nothing remained of the job now, except the stiff work pants with dirt-packed pockets left in the basement for washing; the yellow hard hat on the back porch, the empty lunch pail, already scrubbed, by the kitchen sink. At dinner, he ruled the table like an amiable monarch, surveying the family he loved with pride. Though he was not a man to look back, he allowed the others to talk about the past while he dug happily into the food. How far they had come from the little village outside Taranto, his wife was saying — and they renewed the old joke about choosing Toronto here because it had sounded so familiar. Two vowels and wicked winters made all the difference. The summer-blistered heel of Italy had given them tropical fruits, caressing winters — and poverty. Cesare looked around him, settling his rich gaze on Bruno, his son. He had been late getting home, mud-marked and happy from a won ball game.

"Late, when your Aunt Maria is here?" the father had scolded pleasantly. "What was the score?"

"Five to three for us," the boy replied.

"Good, good. You get any —" his voice trailed away, unable to recall the exact word.

"Runs," Bruno said promptly. "One, that's all."

"Well," shrugged his father, "next time you'll get two." He leaned back, expansive, contented. "Who knows? Maybe someday we'll have another boy, maybe two — add a few players to the team and beat your Aunt Maria at the same time." Maria had two children, both boys, and the Da Costas had named their daughter after her as a sort of hyphenated honor. Something slyly charming crept into the young boy's face, and he said extravagantly: "Who needs more help? I can win by myself." Everyone laughed.

"Hey!" his father beamed, "listen to that, will you?"

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Anna-Maria caught the glance exchanged between her father and the boy — amiable, undeterrable, conspiracy shared alone by them. *You'll spoil him*, the girl thought. She glanced up quickly, catching only her name in her aunt's question to her.

"What? I'm sorry —"

" — just wondered what you'd like for your birthday. Something you really want?" The girl stared across at the composed oasis of her aunt's presence. Could she actually be older than her mother? The brushed arched brows, lashes tilted up with one of those scissory things she and Gina had tried in the dime store one day. Pale fawn hair lopped into a chignon, the light green dress that didn't crease. The girl had a peripheral blur of her mother by contrast: plumper, hurrying plates around, her general features like Aunt Maria's, her eyes still florid from the tear-gas effect of onions sliced and stove heat. *Yes*, Anna-Maria wanted to say, *I would like to be you someday*.

"Well, any ideas to help me, honey?" her aunt urged.

Before the girl could reply, her brother leaped in, still flushed and fidgety from attention: "Jeans! You want jeans, doncha?" For a moment the family paused. The girl's mother flung up her hands in a gesture of resignation; the grandmother knew a few English words and jeans was one of them, since she helped wash them daily. The father's fork stopped in its upward flight and his face wrestled with keeping a host's placidity and a huge hatred for girls in pants. He knew Cordova's daughter and many others wore them. It occurred to him also that someone might remind him how often *he* claimed that they all had to try and adapt to the newer ways of an adopted country. His sister-in-law was laughing, repeating the word, "Jeans . . . really? I see so much of them at our place — but it's *your* birthday, not mine. I'll see what I can find. Anything else?"

"The field trip," Anna-Maria blurted, "I want to go on that."

Why had she said it so suddenly, after all the elaborate care not to broach the subject bluntly? She felt her face darken with embarrassment, and she turned in imploring hope toward her mother.

"The paper for school. You remember it, Momma?"

Some victory recalled swept happily over Emma Da Costa's face. "*I've* got it, right here in my pocket!" And she produced the paper, waving it like a truce flag. "I can read the whole thing — in English. Here, Bruno, pass the Italian part to Grandmother." And in a high, lushly accented voice, she recited the words, one flat upon the other, like ironed clothes. "Please — complete the form by — Maggio, *May* five, signing your name for — per-mis-shun!" She sat back in triumph to the family's applause.

"Okay, now you've read it, suppose you tell me just what it means?"

Emma blew a breath of exasperation. "What it *says*. Anna's class is going on a trip to study nature up close. Trees, birds, things like that."

"Give me the paper." Cesare frowned over it, murmured, made a few clicking sounds, then slapped it with the back of his hand. "It says they are staying away two *nights*," he said carefully. "That doesn't mean go out, come back, go out does it? No, it means *stay* out, that's what it means. *Over*night . . ." he glanced around the table to let the heavy importance of that sink in, adding, "— and in fields, too. It says a field trip —"

"That's just a name, poppa," Anna-Maria defended, despairing at the sound of his voice. "We have tents, and buildings if it rains —"

"It sounds wonderful," said Aunt Maria easily, propping her slender chin

on the knuckles of her hand. She knew what was happening. It was a watered-down version of her own childhood, a baseless fear that had no nationality, only some ancient protective instinct that would anchor any girl to the spot in which she stood. Maria remembered the sorrowing faces at the airport when she left as a grown woman: "Be *careful*, Maria!" Of what? she had asked herself so often. Of living? But she knew she could say very little now without pressuring Cesare, who admired and feared her, who wrestled with new jealousies and old mores. Nothing could be more inept at this moment than to fuel those insecurities with interference.

"Tents and a building?" Cesare was repeating. "Boys *and* girls?"

"Yes," Anna replied, feeling the sharp warning of her mother's shoe under the table, too late.

"No way a daughter of mine will stay out in fields all night with boys! I won't allow it!" His mother had immersed herself in the Italian translation, and Bruno had excused himself with scarcely anyone noticing he'd left. Emma glared down the tablecloth at her husband. She lapsed quickly into the language of her love and her anger: "*Perchè, che cosa potrebbe capitare*?" she demanded angrily.

Just as angrily Cesare's lava-dark eyes burned back at her: "What could happen? Boys, girls? I'll tell you. She's too young, that's one thing. How do we know what happens in a place like that? I know boys and the kind of nature they want to study —"

"That's not true," countered Aunt Maria, not too pleased to have her sons swept away in the lecherous generalities: "Frank and Carl have both been out on field trips and I can tell you they're more interested in snakes than girls at that age."

"She's right," Emma accused. "If it were *Bruno* it would be different. Get home late, go out to Boy Scouts at night, go errands, go to the moon!" she ended grandly. "And he's only 10 . . ." Then, they were all speaking at once, all speaking Italian, while the grandmother put aside her paper and watched from one to the other like some guarding eagle. The ice cream on their plates was pooling into a kaleidoscopic cream of orange and chocolate. The room was hot, and noisy. No one seemed to see Anna-Maria; for all her presence meant, her chair might have been as vacant as Bruno's. She felt her shoulders hurting from holding them too rigidly, her ears rang from the rising voices swirling around her. Like a volcano awake and rumbling somewhere in her chest, she felt an eruptive surge of bitterness and frustration. *Don't speak, Anna — wear a dress, Anna — don't go, Anna.* Swiftly she shot to her feet, vaguely aware of scalding where her sweating thighs had peeled themselves from the leather chair.

"What do you think I am?" she cried, and the voices died, shot down by the suddenness of her voice. "I am Italian and Canadian — but you make me something in between. Should I wear black like poor Grandmother, and trot along behind you, trying to keep up? Or stay home like Momma, while you go off with the other men? How do I fit in with my friends, then?" In desperation, she yanked the admired friend from her mind: "*Gina* can go! In jeans too, I bet. Do you know what it was like for me last year, when I had to stay behind? They put me in another classroom and I took a lesson I didn't need. I never learned anything. I just sat there, thinking about the others. And when they all came back and talked about the trip, I didn't know *anything*." She stopped abruptly, close to tears and refusing to let them see that final shame. Four stunned faces were fixed in slapped fascination, but the one she saw the clearest was her grandmother's. Her bent old body, her webbed skin were the same — but her black eyes shone out fiercely, dancing with a look Anna-Maria would never forget. The fear that had made her brave now made her flee the room, her open defiance dawning on her as the thing that would make it impossible for her father to give in. She leaped the stairs two at a time, deeply, uncontrollably miserable. *I was speaking Italian*, she remembered. *And Grandmother understood every word.*

Anna-Maria lay on her bed for a long time, face down, her tears disappearing into the pillow. Family quarrels were not new to her; all of them could be rousingly embroiled in an argument over anything — politics, the price of bus tickets, the color of the new paint on the Bellinis' house across the street. Usually it was a good-natured game, with cohesive pride drawing them again into laughter. This, she knew, was different. It went deep. But she *felt* it was right to say what she had said, and this fact renewed her anger. She would tell everybody how old-fashioned they were. Even Miss Lissett. No excuses that were lies, like last year. (I've had a cold and they think . . .) I'll scribble it right on the paper — *They won't let me go because* they *are afraid, not me*! I won't speak to them for days, either — not even on my birthday.

The sun lowered, lingering on the gilt picture frames and the wallpaper roses that numbered 82 across the top . . . the paper that made June of her room all year. She would not go back down tonight. As the room darkened, she succumbed to numb fatigue, barely hearing her aunt leave — a few lowered voices in the hall, the smooth hum of Maria's car before it slid away among the howling shrieks of kids still out playing. Anna-Maria fell asleep. She did not hear, at 10.30, the door of her room gently open, the shuffle of her grandmother's slippers, the hoarse whisper as the old woman

the folded paper by Anna-Maria's plate, waiting.

"Open it," her father commanded.

The girl's face turned up to him then, the young face of Emma, but with her father's aristocratic winged eyebrows. Anna-Maria did as she was told, slowly, tightening her stomach muscles. When she saw the names, she lunged the table and folded her arms about her father's thick neck, speechless. Cesare basked happily in the hug, the virtuous warmth he claimed as his own. "An early birthday present," he said airily, gulping the last of his coffee. "Bet you're the *only* kid goes to school with three signatures, eh, all Da Costas?"

Passing Cordova's market, Cesare paused to watch the man unloading boxed flowers along the sidewalk. "Hey," he called, "I hear your Gina's going on the field trip, too?"

"Sure, why not?" Cordova replied casually. There was something wrong with the color combination, he'd decided. Frowning, he removed the offending orange marigolds, and sighed, pleased with the purples, whites and crimsons of sweet allyssum and giant pansies together.

"She's been before?" Cesare asked, attempting indifference.

"Twice now. Anna-Maria going?"

"Oh sure," said Cesare idly, lifting a fat yellow pear from its ruffled paper pocket. "What do I have to fork out for this today?"

"Thirteen cents for you." He grinned, immediately replacing the pear to keep things neat. "Twelve for everybody else . . ."

Cesare had to go now — but not before the lingering doubt that plagued him was done with. "Tony, it's safe for the girls, eh, the field trip?"

"You kidding?" scoffed his friend, planting dark green broccoli among snowballs of cauliflower. "Safer than Rome."

It was a liquid day, near the end of May. The schoolyard shrieked with noise and yells of anticipation, while somebody's dog flew around yapping at the fearsome yellow school bus, a dinosaur it didn't like. Paper shopping bags billowed, pillow cases stuffed with clothes, small suitcases, all were flung into the side storage compartment by a deafened driver. Each child bore a name tag to match the disappearing possession, each carried one lunch, already mashed beyond recognition in the excitement of clutching hands. Miss Lissett herded around, through and behind with a pained expression, nipping like a border collie at the heels of her charges. "*Single* file, please. Let's remember there are *other* children trying to work inside the school, shall we? Yes, go *now*, Martin, but *hurry*!" Several others whose bladders monitored excitement flew for

the bathroom, too. The teacher made her final check, rifled through her briefcase of papers, waited until the last child was aboard, and the doors whooshed shut.

Anna-Maria sat with Sheryl-Lyn Corbett, Gina, and silly Ronnie Martin, who centented himself making ugly faces at drivers unlucky enough to be just behind the bus. "The back seat's best," Gina allowed importantly, "away from *her*. Hey, I like your jeans. They're groovy."

"My aunt gave them to me for my birthday. They're rubbing inside my legs, though."

"They're just too stiff. Get them good and wet when we're away and let them get all crinkly," advised Gina.

"I put mine in our dog's kennel overnight," said Sheryl-Lyn blandly, "and then you can stick them in bleach, too, so they'll look good and old."

They rambled on like that, sisterly, comfortable, pausing only to hear Miss Lissett's occasional announcement that "*that* is a grove of hard maple, the tall, tapering trees are *Lombardi* poplars — many of your parents will remember them from Italy."

This remark made Anna-Maria remember. Five of the class children remained behind, probably already farmed into Mr. Prentice's class, where they would draw stiff, labeled trees on art paper, trees nobody climbed, no birds nested in. Erich Heintz, whose mother thought him brilliant but always insisted he should be in the classroom, was back there. Bella Mitchum, frail and pale and delivered to school each day by car like a fragile parcel. And Frankie MacLeish, who never went anywhere, anyway, would be taking out his sullen discontent by bothering the kid next to him. And Franco and Paula Guardino, they were there. Anna-Maria tugged at her stiff pigtails, smoothed her hand fondly over the rigid jeans. Next year for them, maybe. Maybe. ■